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# Direct HHS to Conduct a Pilot Project to Demonstrate the Value of Naturopathic Care for Medicare-Eligible Seniors

## Why is there a Need for Such a Pilot Project?

Licensed naturopathic physicians are not now included in the Medicare system. If they were to be included, Medicare beneficiaries would have access to a form of healthcare that stresses true prevention and health promotion – encouraging patients to modify their diet, get better sleep and exercise, and reduce their anxiety. This is a particularly cost-effective form of healthcare, since it reduces the likelihood that seniors will need costly prescription drugs and surgeries.

If the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) were directed to undertake a research project to assess the value of naturopathic care, Congress and the Federal government would be better able to determine both the costs and benefits of including licensed naturopathic physicians in Medicare.

## Who Are Naturopathic Physicians and What Do They Do?

Naturopathic physicians are trained as primary care providers. They are expert in the use of safe and effective natural therapies, in addition to conventional therapies, in order to help patients maintain good health and to treat health problems. This approach often has the effect of reducing or eliminating the need for drugs or surgery. Licensed naturopathic doctors (NDs) have attended a four-year, federally accredited post-graduate naturopathic medical school and have passed national licensing exams. Their training emphasizes illness prevention, proactive self-care (such as nutrition and stress reduction), and chronic disease treatment aimed at helping the body heal itself.

## Would Naturopathic Medicine Be Effective for Treating Seniors?

There is considerable evidence that naturopathic medicine is effective at treating numerous chronic conditions that affect America's seniors, among them chronic pain, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, anxiety, and depression.<sup>i</sup> These conditions can be alleviated through the use of natural therapies; seniors would likewise benefit from a reduction in the number of drugs they are prescribed, which often have numerous side effects.

## What do Medicare Beneficiaries Think?

Seventy-five percent of older Americans prefer that their doctor first use natural therapies, such as improved diet or supplements, before prescribing drugs or surgery. In addition, while 55% of seniors would consider seeing a naturopathic physician, only 23% are willing to do so if they have to pay for the entire cost of their care out of pocket.<sup>ii</sup> In other words, millions of people pay Medicare taxes all their working lives, but when they become eligible for Medicare, the kind of patient-centered, prevention-focused health care they want isn't accessible.

Especially with the Boomer generation reaching age 65, seniors increasingly desire services that are well-aligned with healthy aging goals. In many cases, they wish to work with healthcare providers that will help them improve their health literacy and ability to keep themselves well.<sup>iii</sup>

## **Is Medicare Ready for an Approach that Focuses on Prevention?**

In a word, yes. This past March, HHS Secretary Sylvia Burwell announced that Medicare is taking steps toward paying for preventive services aimed at Americans who are at risk for Type 2 diabetes. A pilot study showed that pre-diabetics who worked with a lifestyle coach regularly – and thereby learned the value of healthy eating and increased exercise – lost an average of 5.5% of their body weight after a year, “enough to substantially cut their risk of the disease” in Secretary Burwell’s words. Medicare saved more than \$2600 for each person enrolled in the pilot, more than covering the costs of the program.<sup>iv</sup>

Furthermore, the Million Hearts<sup>®</sup> program, run by HHS and its Centers for Disease Control (CDC), has an aggressive education and outreach effort underway in order to prevent 1 million heart attacks and strokes by 2017. The program plans to study the value of its risk reduction model – including its cost effectiveness within Medicare.<sup>v</sup>

Following in these footsteps, it is entirely possible that naturopathic care will provide a new model for healthcare delivery within Medicare that improves seniors’ quality of life, diminishes the interventions required, and saves taxpayer dollars.

## **What Would a Pilot Project Cover?**

A Medicare pilot project would study the outcome of naturopathic treatment provided by licensed NDs to a group of 500 Medicare-eligible seniors in several states – including those states where NDs serve as primary care providers.

The study would focus on treatment outcomes for cardiovascular disease. The study would track patient outcomes including: weight; body mass index; lipids, blood sugars, cholesterol, and triglycerides; healthcare provider utilization rates, hospitalization rates, medication use, perceived health and quality of life, independence and autonomy, and cost savings – all as compared with a control group of 500 Medicare-eligible seniors not receiving naturopathic treatment.

The study would be conducted over 3 years. It would be guided by a project team that, while informed by thought leaders and experts from the naturopathic profession, would be completely independent.

## **Why the Focus on Cardiovascular Disease (CVD)?**

Cardiovascular disease affects more than 83 million Americans, half of whom are seniors. Indeed, upwards of 70% of seniors – both men and women – suffer from at least some type of cardiovascular illness.<sup>vi</sup> CVD claims more lives than all forms of cancer combined - some 787,000 Americans each year.<sup>vii</sup> Given these numbers, treating cardiovascular disease is an expensive proposition. The cost to treat Medicare eligible seniors was \$121 billion in 2009 and is doubtless much more now – amounting to nearly 40% of total CVD treatment costs.<sup>viii</sup>

Cardiovascular disease is preventable to a great degree given that people can eat better, exercise more, and reduce their stress in order to reduce excess fat, lower their blood pressure, increase their ‘good’ cholesterol levels, etc.

## **Does Naturopathic Treatment Work for Cardiovascular Disease?**

The evidence suggests that naturopathic care is effective for preventing the onset of cardiovascular disease and that it may also be cost-effective. A trio of peer-reviewed studies, carried out between 2010 and 2014, appeared in publications as diverse as the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, and the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*.<sup>ix</sup>

## **What is a Key Anticipated Outcome?**

Because naturopathic physicians are expert in natural, low-invasive care, subjects' reliance on expensive prescription drugs would be expected to drop precipitously.

Alarming, most older Americans take an average of three to five medications.<sup>x</sup> A study that tracked seniors from 2005 to 2011 shows that their use of prescription drugs is on the increase – as is their use of dietary supplements. It estimates that their risk from drug/drug and drug/supplement interactions has nearly doubled – from 8% to 15%.<sup>xi</sup> Indeed, seniors are more likely than younger Americans to suffer from an adverse drug event due to inappropriate or ineffective prescribing. In a study of more than 150,000 elderly patients, 29% had received at least one of 33 potentially inappropriate drugs.<sup>xii</sup> The estimated rate of harmful drug interactions is 6% for patients with two medications to as high as 50% if patients are taking five or more medications.<sup>xiii</sup>

Naturopathic physicians are trained extensively in pharmacology. This includes managing patients' medications and coordinating prescription medications with herb/nutritional supplementation. As such, NDs are ideally suited for this particular pilot project.

## **What is the Prospective Long-Term Benefit to the Medicare System?**

Medicare is the primary source of health insurance for the nation's seniors. It reflects an orientation to treating the symptoms of illness rather than preventing illness in the first place. Treatment by licensed naturopathic physicians stands to demonstrate tangible benefits – both for seniors' health and well-being and cost containment of Medicare funds – by changing the focus to prevention and proactive patient involvement in their own healthy aging.

## NOTES

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